Poverty in the media

Being seen and getting heard

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How people who have experienced poverty can have a more effective voice in the media.

Public understanding of poverty in the UK is limited. The media can give people with experience of poverty the opportunity to present their views, experiences and opinions, which can help to inform and create a groundswell of public opinion supporting efforts to tackle poverty.

This study focuses on:

- how people can give their views and tell their stories when they are presented as 'case studies' in the press, on radio or on television;

- the roles and responsibilities of voluntary and community organisations in helping journalists find case study individuals – and the issues those individuals should consider;

- opportunities in the 'new' media to produce and disseminate material, and the challenge of reaching an audience;

- the need to produce accessible, good-quality material that people will pass on;

- 'viral' media and developing online communities.

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Introduction

There is considerable poverty and deprivation in the UK; nearly 11 million people live below the poverty line. The Government is committed to tackling poverty and has made some progress, but much more needs to be done. A key requirement is a groundswell of public opinion putting pressure on the Government and giving support to policies to combat poverty.

Public recognition and understanding of poverty in the UK is, however, limited. The media can help to remedy this by developing awareness and promoting debate. In particular, the media can show what poverty is like by providing opportunities for people who have direct experience of poverty to be seen and heard, to have a voice and to present their point of view. At present, their voice is heard less than it should be.

This study looks at how people who have themselves experienced poverty can have a more effective voice in the media. It considers opportunities in the 'traditional' media – press, radio and television – focusing especially on how individuals are presented as illustrative 'case studies'. We have also explored possibilities offered by the 'new media', centred on the internet and mobile communications, where people can certainly claim a voice – but might struggle to find an audience.

This research is part of an extensive programme of work on poverty supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Previous work has examined public attitudes to poverty, while the Foundation's current programme, on 'Public Interest in Poverty Issues', emphasises the role of the media. Recent work has looked at how poverty is reported, what journalists should consider when tackling poverty issues and how information about poverty can be successfully presented and disseminated.

Accompanying this report are short films that can be viewed at www.jrf.org.uk. They provide some examples of different approaches to reporting poverty and presenting people's stories. It is intended to supplement the report by providing accessible, visual examples that may be used to inform and develop practice.

Working with the 'traditional' media

Poverty is under-reported and inadequately reported in the media for a variety of reasons. It may be seen as difficult to cover, too depressing for the audience and 'worthy but not newsworthy'. There is also a tendency for the media to focus on extreme, sensational stories, ignoring the mass of everyday experience. Critics complain that reporting on poverty too often relies on stereotypes and that it labels people and places.

There is, however, some good, sensitive and effective reporting of poverty and its consequences. Examples include pieces in *The Big Issue*, *The Guardian*, BBC television features on child poverty and innovative (if perhaps controversial) programmes such as *Ministry of Food* and *The Secret Millionaire*.

It is generally considered that poverty 'works' as a story only if the views and experiences of people living in poverty are presented. Personal stories resonate with the public. Consequently, journalists may invite people with direct experience of poverty to tell their stories and give their views. In this way people can have a voice – and may reach large audiences.

Journalists can have difficulty finding people prepared to tell their stories in the media and they often rely on third-sector (voluntary and community) organisations to put them in touch with suitable individuals and families. Some organisations readily respond to such requests, while others refuse them. The media sometimes

makes inappropriate or excessive demands and there are real risks – especially for the individuals presenting themselves and their stories. But it is important that these voices are heard in the media, not least because of the potential impact on public perceptions and opinion.

The report sets out the key issues that third-sector organisations should consider when responding to media requests to find case study individuals. Organisations need to think about what kind of coverage there might be and the potential implications for the individuals if they take part. The most important point is that the organisation, having brokered the contact, has substantial responsibilities to support and safeguard the interests of the individuals.

We have also drawn up a checklist of points that potential case study individuals should think about. They need to consider the possible risks involved and negotiate their involvement – for example, whether their identity will be revealed and what editorial control they might have. People should think through what they are going to say and how to say it, and should get support, especially from the organisation that brokered their involvement.

To a large extent it is a matter of trust – the establishment of trusting relationships between journalists, the third sector and individuals.

New media, new opportunities

The media 'landscape' has changed enormously. There has been increasing fragmentation of media and audiences. Media consumption habits are changing and content is changing too. Traditional forms of media are facing serious economic pressures, particularly because of competition and declining advertising revenues. Meanwhile, falling costs of production in the new media have resulted in the development of new outlets and enormous growth in 'user-generated content' such as 'citizen journalism'. However, there is a significant *digital divide*: many people, especially those on low incomes, are left behind and left out, especially in terms of access to the internet.

Overall, the new media – centred on digital technology, particularly the internet – is promoting new connectedness and 'many-to-many'

interactive communication. In addition, there has been an important shift towards media forms that have little central control, such as internet social networking sites.

The new media provides new opportunities for people to produce and communicate material, easily and cheaply. Individuals and groups can send emails, develop websites, write blogs and use Twitter, and record and upload sound, stills and videos.

Third-sector organisations can play a key role in ensuring that opportunities offered by the new media are available to people with experience of poverty. They can provide access to the technology, help people to use it and provide internet space so that material can be published and accessed by others.

Producing material can in itself be liberating and empowering. But, in relation to developing public understanding of poverty, production is a means to an end. The message has to be effectively communicated if it is to stand a chance of being influential. The voice of people with experience of poverty has to find an audience; it has to be heard.

Getting to an audience presents an enormous challenge, especially if the content is serious rather than popular entertainment. But it can be done. There are good examples of campaigns that have disseminated personal accounts and views, and have successfully developed online communities. Material can be submitted to media websites where it is more likely to be accessed and third-sector organisations can be proactive in alerting potential audiences.

To disseminate material effectively, there are two basic requirements. It should be of good quality and be interesting and engaging. 'Digital storytelling' is a good example of how to produce quality material. It is also essential that people should be helped to find the material – and, having seen it, want to pass it on. A strong 'viral video' can reach a substantial audience and help to inform and build a community of interest.

It is suggested that the third sector could develop a web portal that would host the contributions of individuals and groups, including digital stories and debates. It could be a trusted and reliable resource, bringing together material,

promoting access and thereby developing better public understanding and generating pressure for change.

A local-scale initiative could also be established. Media and communications experts could work intensively with a specific community experiencing poverty to produce and disseminate material about people's stories, everyday lives, issues and views. There would be an emphasis on quality and achieving an audience. Such a demonstration project could test out the potential of the new media.

Conclusions: developing opportunities

People with experience of poverty have something distinctive to say about the causes and effects of poverty. They are experts. Their views, experiences and opinions are insufficiently and inadequately presented in the media. This report highlights ways in which this might be remedied and points to opportunities for people with experience of poverty to engage more effectively with the media.

1 Introduction

A divided society

Our society is deeply divided: there is a large gap between rich and poor. Over the past 30 years or so, that gap has widened. Despite some recent improvement (Hills *et al.*, 2009) the UK is one of the most economically unequal societies in the developed world (OECD, 2008).

There is considerable poverty and deprivation in this country, with nearly 11 million people living below the poverty line in households receiving less than 60 per cent of median income (before housing costs calculation; see DWP, 2008). In 2006–07, the bottom 10 per cent of households received just 3 per cent of total incomes, while the top 10 per cent got 28 per cent of the total. The wealth gap is even greater. And poverty is not only a matter of money; it is also about social exclusion and powerlessness, poor health and reduced life expectancy (Flaherty *et al.*, 2004). Nor does it affect only people living on benefits or pensions; 39 per cent of those in poverty are low-paid workers and their dependants (DWP, 2008).

The Government does acknowledge the existence of poverty and the need to tackle it. In 1999, it made a historic commitment to halve child poverty by 2010 and to eliminate it by 2020. The Government reports that 600,000 children have been lifted out of poverty since 1998/99. These changes came about principally through economic and employment growth, and fiscal measures such as tax credits. In the past two years, however, there has been a rise of some 200,000 children living in poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) estimates that the Government will need to spend an additional £3 billion on children's benefits just to achieve its target for 2010/11. As the recession puts additional pressure on public finances, this will prove a considerable challenge. Nevertheless, the Government has continued to confirm its commitment to end child poverty (CPAG, 2008).

There is undoubtedly a great deal more to be done if poverty is to be reduced significantly. One key requirement is a groundswell of public opinion putting pressure on the Government and giving support to policies to combat poverty. This has to be based on public recognition and understanding of poverty.

This recognition and understanding is currently quite limited. Although a majority (three-quarters) of people in the UK think that the gap between rich and poor is too great, there is much less support for redistribution. In fact, support for redistributive policies has been falling (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008). Moreover, many people doubt whether there is 'real' poverty in the UK and are unconvinced by the concept of 'relative poverty'. People who are not themselves reliant on benefits tend to suppose that benefits are far more generous than they actually are. There is limited understanding of what it means to be poor, and of the nature and causes of contemporary poverty in the UK.

This limited understanding is unsurprising. Poverty is often not very visible and there may be few opportunities for those who are better off to interact more than superficially with those experiencing poverty. Affluent people and poorer people live different lives in different places (Philo, 1995; Toynbee, 2003). Those experiencing poverty may hardly be seen, let alone heard.

The media

The media is enormously influential in shaping public opinion and can play a major role in developing public understanding of economic, social and political issues. It can bridge a divided society, opening up communication across boundaries. It can challenge – or deepen – prejudice; it can provide a forum for debate; and it can investigate, expose, advocate and campaign.

It can strengthen, or undermine, public support for policies to combat poverty.

The media can provide important opportunities for people who have experienced poverty to have a voice, present their point of view and communicate across social boundaries. But that voice is heard less than it should be and, it can be argued, is not only under-represented but also presented partially and inadequately. That appears to be a significant reason why the public are insufficiently informed about poverty.

The 'traditional' media – press, radio and television – often seems to struggle to know how best to cover stories about poverty in the UK. When journalists do cover these stories, they sometimes recognise the need to present 'case studies'. Featuring the experiences of people living on low incomes can certainly bring a story alive and make it accessible. It can give a voice to people experiencing poverty, but it also carries risks for individuals and there is a significant danger of misrepresentation. Nevertheless, it is a real opportunity to get across messages that need to be heard.

The so-called 'new media', centred on the internet and mobile communications, offers further opportunities. The new media is evolving rapidly and its potential is continually being developed and extended. The extent to which people experiencing poverty are able to participate actively in the new media, present their views and get their message across is uncertain, but there are real possibilities for new forms of communication and dialogue.

This report looks at how people who have experienced poverty can have a more effective voice in the media. It is based on an exploration of how both the traditional and new media operate, and how they can be made to work to provide better opportunities for people to be seen and heard. We believe there is no substitute for personal testimony: those who have experienced poverty are experts on its meaning and consequences. They can talk in real, concrete terms about the day-to-day impacts of poverty. Their voice needs to be heard in order to enhance understanding and build pressure for change.

Background: work supported by JRF

This study is part of an extensive programme of work on poverty supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

Poverty has been a central concern of the Foundation since its inception just over a century ago. Its continued focus on poverty seems justifiable; a recent JRF inquiry found that poverty, together with inequality, is regarded as one of the main 'social evils' in the UK today (Womack, 2008).

JRF has recognised the importance of public attitudes in relation to policy responses to poverty. In 2007, Orton and Rowlingson were supported by JRF to examine public attitudes to inequality and they found that, while 'there is considerable public concern regarding economic inequality … attitudes are highly complex and contradictory'. Castell and Thompson (2007) found that many people feel that poverty is not an issue in the UK; that the word 'poverty' is itself problematic; and that 'the public are currently a long way from supporting an anti-UK poverty agenda'. They conclude that there is a need to 'personalise the statistics' with credible examples and explanations of what poverty means, how it is produced and reproduced, and what might be done about it. Another JRF study reported that attitudes to people living in poverty can be negative and discriminatory, amounting to 'povertyism' (Killeen, 2008). JRF has also supported work tracking patterns of inequality, including the geography of inequality. A key finding was that 'both poor and wealthy households have become more and more geographically segregated from the rest of society' (Dorling *et al.*, 2007).

The Foundation's current programme on 'Public Interest in Poverty Issues' has laid emphasis on the role of the media. A team at Glasgow Caledonian University has recently completed a detailed analysis of how poverty is reported in the media and has found that coverage is limited and often inadequate – but there are clear opportunities to improve scope and content (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008). Some of the ways in

which journalists can do that have been set out in *Reporting Poverty in the UK: A Practical Guide for Journalists*, a project supported by JRF and undertaken by the Media Trust and the Society of Editors (Seymour, 2008). The Foundation has also supported a series of workshops with people who have direct experience of poverty, asking them how they think aspects of poverty can be communicated more effectively (UKCAP, 2008).

Our own work fits with these previous studies, focusing specifically on how people with experience of poverty can have a more effective voice in the media. It is concerned with how the media works, how journalists do their job, and processes and structures in the traditional and new media. But it is particularly about how people can find and use opportunities to express themselves, communicate the realities of poverty and contribute to debate about its causes and solutions.

Two other JRF studies are taking place alongside this one. Independent film production company Spectacle is working with communities in Luton and in London, examining and recording people's views on how poverty is depicted in the media and how it should be depicted (www. spectacle.co.uk/projects_page.php?id=158). In addition, Cambridge Policy Consultants are looking at what kinds of information and advocacy initiatives are successful in building support for poverty eradication, and how 'success' in that context can be identified and measured (Delvaux, 2009, forthcoming).

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 looks in detail at conventional interactions between journalists and individuals with experience of poverty. Journalists offer people opportunities to 'tell their stories', which are presented as illustrative 'case studies'. The media often approach third-sector (voluntary and community) organisations for help in locating these individuals; we discuss the issues that these organisations should consider and their responsibilities. We also look at the issues that the individuals themselves should consider, including the consequences of working with the media.

Chapter 3 considers the changing media 'landscape' and the development of 'new media'.

It is clear that there are new opportunities for self-expression without the constraints and controls of the traditional media. However, getting an audience is a major challenge in the new media – and this is clearly essential if a voice is to be heard and is to be influential. Here we look at how new media can enable such communication, focusing on the importance of producing quality content and distributing that effectively. We also offer some practical ideas for further action.

Chapter 4 brings together findings from the study and discusses what makes for effective communication about the experience of poverty. It considers how existing and new opportunities can be developed in the future.

Accompanying this report are short films that can be viewed at www.jrf.org.uk. They explore the use of case studies, the views that individuals want to present and the power and presentation of personal testimony. The films provide practical illustrations of different approaches to reporting poverty. It is intended to supplement the report by providing accessible, visual examples that can be used to inform and develop practice.

This report is not intended to serve as a guide for campaigning – though we have a fair amount to say about the roles and responsibilities of third-sector organisations and are, of course, concerned with impacts on public opinion. Nor is it a definitive statement on all the opportunities for people with experience of poverty to engage with and participate in the media. But it does aim to draw out some lessons from the practical experience of organisations and individuals that might be useful for others.

2 Working with the 'traditional' media

Access to the media

The traditional media presents people's stories and, to a greater or lesser extent, gives them the opportunity to offer their views and talk about their lives. Their stories are covered in the newspapers, on the radio or on TV for a wide range of reasons. They may have committed a crime, or done something unusual or difficult, or displayed great heroism, courage or generosity. For one reason or another, the media considers that their stories are worth telling and are likely to be of interest to their readers, listeners or viewers.

Very few people can claim direct access to the mass media; possibly rather more can have direct access to small audiences via media such as community radio (Jankowski and Prehn, 2002). Individuals can also 'compete' for a voice by, for example, the long-established practice of writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper (see Box 1), or the more modern examples of taking part in a radio phone-in or getting a place on a TV talk show. And there are real opportunities here to express opinions – not least the opportunity to challenge the media's treatment of poverty. But the conventional, most common form of interaction is when the media invites participation, offering an individual the opportunity to have a voice that is set within a context of comment and editorial control by the media. This chapter examines how that process works and how it might work better, so that people who have experienced poverty can present their stories and give their views.

Poverty in the media

Poverty is under-reported in the media. It is a major social and political issue, yet most of the traditional media gives it scant coverage. This is especially the case for poverty in the UK; poverty in Africa gets fuller – and often better-informed and more sympathetic – treatment. The recent JRF study on the reporting of poverty in the media (McKendrick

et al., 2008) found that, when poverty in the UK is covered, it is often a secondary or contextual issue, not the main focus of a story. There is also a strong tendency to marginalise and label people on low incomes as the 'other': 'them' rather than 'us'. Discriminatory and 'othering' language is commonly used (Lister, 2004). Evidently, not all publicity is good publicity – negative coverage can be very destructive.

Treatment varies across the media and poverty is featured in a variety of ways. It might be used as a backdrop to drama and comedy, as well as being reported as news or documentary. On the whole, it is seen as a difficult and problematic issue to deal with. It is considered to be inherently boring and depressing; and it is about complicated statistics. It is far from entertaining and is thought to turn off audiences – unless it is ridiculed in a comedy like *Shameless*. Nevertheless, some journalists and media have risen to the challenge and have found effective – if perhaps controversial – ways of exploring issues facing people on low incomes. *The Secret Millionaire* is one example of an interesting, engaging treatment.

Journalists say that it can be difficult to give poverty a focus, since it is ongoing and amorphous, rather than a specific 'event'. As one journalist put it:

> *Poverty is worthy, not newsworthy. The struggle from a media point of view is the choice between an important but dull story and a trivial one that's interesting.*

Poverty struggles to secure a place in the 'market place of issues' in the media. The media is said to be driven by lists, anniversaries, controversies and the 'biggest, worst, greatest'. It is filled with celebrity gossip, not stories about ordinary people trying to manage on a low income. A newspaper editor who is committed to covering poverty issues commented:

I might have an interest in writing a piece on fuel poverty – but it's competing with Billie Piper or the Lapland theme park in the New Forest. Over a longer period it's become harder [to get stories on poverty included] *because the UK media has become more full of tat and fluff and celebs – the media on itself.*

If poverty is covered directly, it tends to gain a place as a result of dull events such as the publication of statistics, reports and policy statements. From time to time, however, new – and successful – connections are found, for example Jamie Oliver's *Ministry of Food*. Other examples are the powerful animated films of children experiencing poverty, *The Wrong Trainers*, shown on the BBC1 Newsround programme (http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/specials/2006/the_wrong_trainers/).

Bad news sells, sensationalism attracts audiences. While poverty might not be considered newsworthy, a story about someone who abuses the benefits system is deemed worthy of coverage – and the media tends to seek out the most dramatic, most shocking, most extreme cases (Franklin, 1999). The 'ordinary poor' are absent from these accounts. A journalist said:

The bulk gets missed out – they're not interesting or photogenic. It's just the extremes, the unusual gets highlighted.

A media consultant said that journalists 'don't want to do mild poverty – it's mega all-singing, all-dancing poverty'.

The media often does not recognise what a charity worker called 'the power of the banal', credible stories from ordinary people 'struggling to buy Christmas presents for their kids'. The banal can seem to be just unremarkable – it isn't 'a story', it isn't worth reporting. But it can be. The challenge is to make it work as story; and it can capture the imagination of the audience simply because it offers a revealing insight into everyday life.

Box 1: Competing for a voice: a letter to the editor can convey a powerful message

I fear the winter and hope for nothing

Up until three years ago I was a member of the working class (Benefits clampdown, July 21). I have no qualifications and I raised my family by working hard and earning little. As such I was never able to have either a pension, a mortgage or insurance. Three years ago, within six days of each other, I had a heart attack and my wife had heart failure (totally unconnected). We as a small family were destroyed.

My wife was in intensive care for a month and my daughter took an overdose believing us both dead. What happened to us as a family can happen to any family. We rallied and my son put himself through university by working in a pub and looking after himself – without a single penny from us because we had nothing.

My point is real poverty grows on you and as the things you have become obsolete or break, the poverty deepens. We are now three adults living on £23 a day. Admittedly we have our rent and rates paid. As heart patients we have been instructed to stay warm in the winter as the cold thickens the blood. To this end I contacted my gas and electric supplier in a bid to have the prepayment meters taken out of my home as the tariff was too high and my income was so low. I was told it would cost £200.

I told the supplier that the meters were in place from a former tenant and I had no credit issues with them. They told me it was not their problem. I went to the ombudsman and now I can have the meters taken out if I pay for the energy by direct debit, the rub being that I have to pay in advance, costing me 79% of my income in one month for this to happen. So I can't and they know it.

Every day I shop for the house. I am conscious of the need to eat healthily but I cannot afford to. Every day I walk past the grapes and look at the price of strawberries. We eat greens and pulses, and we eat pork, but cannot afford chicken. We do not drink, smoke, go out nor entertain and life is hard and getting harder, not just for us but for many.

The television is our only window on a life we once led. We sit destroyed by poverty and watch the world go by as if we were dead but have yet to fall over. While watching the TV we see MPs and MEPs who spend more on taxis than we get to live on and they are telling the country they are going to get tough on us and people like us because we live on benefits.

In relative terms we are poor and getting poorer, but those who represent us are completely oblivious to our needs.

I can speak, but have no voice, and those claiming to represent me have failed me. As the gas and electric prices rise for all, they may also become out of reach for many. Now I fear the winter and hope for nothing.

The BBC news now tells me my benefits will be scrapped and I will be tested (I have been tested twice already). I will have to bare all my privacy in the hope of retaining the right to survive the winter. So I ask myself, why can people demand the destruction of the poor? The answer is simple. There are 600-odd vacancies in Westminster every four years. The job, if you can get it, pays a king's ransom and all that is required is that you follow whatever is in vogue. At the moment, acting Dickensian is all the rage.

[Name and address supplied]
(The Guardian, 22 July 2008)

Stereotypes of people and places are presented and prejudices reinforced (Seymour, 2008). In a situation where mass media are losing audiences, there may be an even greater reluctance to challenge preconceptions and prejudices. There is also less capacity – and less commitment – to checking stories, let alone developing them (Davies, 2009). Coverage can be simplistic and sometimes crudely judgemental, connecting with notions of the deserving poor (children, pensioners) and undeserving poor (young men, asylum-seekers). People in poverty are seen as 'objects' and as passive victims.

People living in poverty may also be blamed for their situation. A campaigner against poverty – who has herself lived in poverty – said:

… in the past ten years or so I feel it's appalling the way that people experiencing poverty and who are unemployed are portrayed in the media. They've created a whole public hysteria against the poor, unemployed, single parents, and I find it disgusting … It makes me ill when I see reported cases on the telly. They talk about deprived communities as though the people in them created them.

A community representative with considerable experience of the media said:

We don't trust them. They paint the blackest picture. They never come for good stories like how we work together as a community. They just want hoodies and single parents – they just want to label us.

There is also usually little or no reference to the causes of poverty and the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty. A television producer noted that:

Television is good for exploring emotions – not so great for doing arguments, debates, and exploring ideas.

There is, though, some good, sensitive and effective reporting of poverty and its consequences. There are journalists and media outlets that can, and do, handle poverty well and treat people on low incomes with respect. *The Guardian*, for example, regularly and effectively runs stories that are directly or indirectly about poverty. The Sunday broadsheets also sometimes have substantial and well researched pieces.

Box 2: 'One child in four' – BBC North West's coverage of child poverty

To coincide with the Labour Party's conference in Manchester in September 2008, BBC North West ran a series of features on child poverty. The regional television magazine programme BBC *North West Tonight* explored the theme each evening over the course of a week. Short case studies were presented, followed by studio interviews with expert commentators, culminating in an interview with the Prime Minister.

One child in four in the North West lives in poverty. The case studies were chosen to show what this means. Individuals – found with the help of local third-sector organisations – talked about their experiences. The Smith family from Openshaw, Manchester talked about the daily struggle to make ends meet. Mr Smith is in a low-paid job and working tax credits have lifted this family of four just above the poverty line, but Mrs Smith constantly has to make choices – between buying food or paying bills, for example. She explains that 'it's emotionally draining' – and that there is limited awareness of the situation:

MPs don't see people crying themselves to sleep at night because they're worried about whether they're going to be able to feed their children tomorrow. And that is something I've literally done.

Children also described their lives. One was a young carer, another had experienced severe poverty, homelessness and life in an area blighted by crime where there is nowhere safe to play. These cases were anonymised, illustrated by animations to accompany their voices.

The use of case studies gave people with direct experience of poverty the opportunity to have a voice and presented the realities of poverty to a prime time audience.

The theme was also covered on BBC local radio in the region and on the BBC Manchester section of the website, which provided additional information, statistics and stories.

See: www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/people/one_child_in_four/

On television, the Community Channel was set up particularly to give marginalised people a voice. Some community radio stations provide opportunities for local people living on low incomes to be heard and can present community issues in a refreshingly direct way. *The Big Issue* presents stories and comment from homeless people, and such pieces can make the experience of poverty accessible and of interest to readers. In the North West, the BBC recently ran a series of insightful and sensitive features on child poverty to coincide with the Labour Party conference in Manchester (see Box 2). Such examples show it can be done.

The short films accompanying this report look at the production of a piece for radio, featuring an interview with a woman trying to manage on a low income. This example shows that good reporting is certainly possible – but it can be difficult to get it right.

Media practice – and opportunities

There is a widespread view in the media that poverty only 'works' as a story if the views and experiences of people living in poverty are presented. Personal stories can really resonate with the public. These stories create opportunities for people who have experienced poverty to have a voice and make a real impact – and some forms of traditional media reach huge audiences. It is striking that much reporting on poverty does not actually include personal stories but relies solely on statistics and comment from charities, academics and policy-makers, together with the journalist's interpretation. A recent JRF study found that people experiencing poverty featured in fewer than one in eight UK poverty reports in the UK news and noted that there is a 'conspicuous absence of the voice of those in poverty themselves' (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008). There is clearly considerable scope and potential to increase such coverage and bring in personal accounts.

Journalists can have considerable difficulty in finding a suitable individual or family willing to have their stories presented in the media. Many journalists now spend most of their time in the office (Davies, 2009) and their contacts are limited, especially their contacts in disadvantaged communities. Journalists are often in a hurry, having to find suitable people in time to meet tight

deadlines. They will frequently rely on third-sector organisations, especially campaigning groups, to act as broker, putting them in touch with 'case studies'. And those individuals are expected to be 'suitable'; a media consultant remarked that 'journalists rely on third-sector organisations to do some degree of screening of case studies'. Journalists in a hurry want immediate access and may have no time to check facts, explore nuances and consider how 'representative' a case study may be. In addition, they may not necessarily know much about a story. Some may be unsure of what a particular third-sector organisation does, may be uncertain how far it can be trusted and may be concerned that it has its 'own agenda'.

So what does the media want? Practice varies a good deal, but third-sector organisations say that journalists tend to want people who conform to stereotypes and to the preconceptions of their audiences. They prefer people who are 'not trained up' to respond to media interviews, since they may have 'lost their sparkle'. Interviews are quite often done by phone, but, where they are face to face, convenience can be important. Hence, London-based media will frequently want individuals who live in London. Where appropriate, a third-sector organisation might provide photographs of people or settings, but most newspapers or magazines will want to take their own photos. A newspaper journalist complained that organisations send in poor quality, 'cheesy' pictures that they can't use. The media generally prefers people willing to be identified, but may be prepared to grant anonymity, especially if children are involved. Anonymity can be much easier to do with a written piece or on radio, but television can use silhouettes, out-of-focus images, pixilation, an actor's voice and even animation. Participants are not usually paid a fee, but may be given expenses; a journalist argued that 'paying a fee would skew the relationship'.

For visual media, image is very important; it can even seem to take precedence over the story itself. This can be a very contentious matter and third-sector organisations complain that some journalists will demand people who 'look poor' or are physically attractive (Wignall, 2008). They may want poor surroundings and perhaps children in the frame.

Huw Williams of the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme said:

I remember hearing about a television crew doing a report from a scheme in the East End of Glasgow. Halfway through, the reporter took the charity worker who was helping them find interviewees to one side and told him, 'These people aren't poor enough. They've got carpets'.

(Quoted in Seymour, 2008, p. 59)

The press officer of one organisation recalled another example. A newspaper journalist had done a good interview with a family and a photographer was later sent out to get a picture of them:

The photographer put the family into the kids' bedroom, pulled open drawers and pulled clothes out, etc. to make it look as though the family lived in chaos. Not good.

Images can, understandably, be difficult to find; as a newspaper journalist said, 'how do you show debt in a photo?'.

Box 3: Third-sector resources

The askcharity website
The http://askcharity.org.uk website has been set up to provide a link between the media and charities. Journalists are registered with the site (and are checked to ensure they are genuine). They use the site predominantly to reach charities/third-sector organisations that are able to help them find case studies. There are also requests for comments from experts, access to reports, etc. The service is free and about 1,800 journalists and programme-makers are registered users. This website has had success in facilitating linkages; but has limited capacity and could be developed much further. It is a 'well-used, well-liked resource', but there is scope for improvement and further development (Strang France and Fellows, 2008).

Askcharity and the Voluntary Action Media Unit have published a free guide, *Clever Communications* (Jenkins, 2008), to help charities work with the media (www.vamu.org.uk/downloads/CleverComms.pdf). The guide

has short pieces on using both the traditional and new media, and also an extensive media directory.

The Media Trust

The Media Trust (www.mediatrust.org) provides a wide range of media support services to the third sector. It offers media and communications training, and provides volunteers from the media/communications industry to help third-sector organisations improve the way they communicate. It produces films for the sector and delivers marketing and communications campaigns for both third-sector and public-sector organisations. The Trust established the Community Channel (www.communitychannel.org), a digital television channel broadcast on Sky, Virgin and Freeview. In partnership with the Press Association, the Media Trust runs Community Newswire, a free news distribution service that disseminates stories from the third sector. And the Media Trust also works with organisations that work with young people to help them get their voices heard in the media.

The media can be sensitive and journalists can try to empathise – even with situations that may be well outside their own everyday experience. One interesting dilemma, noted by a media consultant, is that:

> *Liberal journalists are often looking for blameless people but, if you are to be honest, everyone makes mistakes.*

While a journalist may be sympathetic, editing can give the story a different gloss, and that is often beyond the journalist's control.

Working with the media

Third-sector organisations are seen as potential 'dating agencies', providing the media with access to individuals and families as 'case studies'. That role brings with it substantial responsibilities and it can involve real dilemmas and create serious problems. Most third-sector organisations, particularly those heavily involved in campaigning, recognise the power of real-life stories, but they are also wary of the media and concerned about ensuring the safety and dignity of people they

may offer as case studies. A journalist said that the third sector was 'overprotective' of case study individuals – but conceded that he could understand why. A press officer in a national charity commented that it is not just a matter of being worried about how a story might be presented or misrepresented – it is also about making sure that people understand what they might be getting themselves into (see Box 4).

Third-sector organisations respond to these media requests in a variety of ways, from real willingness to help through to outright refusal. Some are proactive and offer cases when they publish reports and launch campaigns, and routinely say on their press releases that case studies can be made available. Some not only are keen to help people have a voice in this way but also see this as a core element of what they do and what they are for. They may see it as a way of challenging and changing public opinion, and so, potentially, influencing policy.

Some organisations say they would try to work with almost anyone and one said:

> *We're not cautious and guarded. I have been known to say to a journalist: 'What have you got and what are you looking for?'.*

Many will work with some journalists and media organisations but not others. A media officer of a campaigning organisation put it this way:

> *There's a difference between a social affairs correspondent at a broadsheet who knows how to speak to people in our position and will want to have an intelligent conversation – and someone from Channel 5 who gets a PA to call up looking for a family with a single mother.*

She said:

> *I'm more sympathetic to someone doing a documentary looking at complex issues than someone doing a tabloid-style piece.*

Of course, the dilemma here is that the 'tabloid-style piece' might be read by millions while the documentary might be seen by relatively few. The tabloid piece might even be better.

There are also organisations that, while they

will talk to the media, will never facilitate access to case studies, primarily because it is deemed to be too risky to individuals and might potentially damage their cause.

Box 4: Managing risk – and what can go wrong

A charity's media officer recalled a 'disaster' when making a film for television:

I got our project in a small community … to get some children to be filmed. We'd said to the kids, let's use phrases like 'some children can't afford x' but there were two things the kids said that caused problems. One said 'two kids in my football team can't afford boots'; another said 'my mum can't afford the dancing gear'. It was a great film and was shown on TV … But the local community were horrified – so much so that we can't work there in the foreseeable future. The problem was that the community was so small that everyone knew who the two kids were who couldn't afford football boots, and everyone knew the girl. There was a message board on which they ripped into us for weeks and weeks. A woman said I had done a great disservice to those kids. I've learned that, if we were going to do it again, I'd prefer not to use kids of school age as they have to go to school the next day and can face problems … It was done with so much preparation … it's the only time it's ever backfired.

The press officer of another organisation said:

I've come across a service user who treated an interview like a therapeutic session and revealed every single last detail, even when we advised him to limit what he said. He really enjoyed the chance to tell his story and to be the centre of attention for once, and revealed much more than we felt was appropriate for publication. Asking the journalist not to reveal x, y, z was tricky – I was accused of being 'overprotective'.

This press officer went on to say that people sometimes not only reveal too much about their personal lives, but also make 'potentially libellous criticism of the people they feel have contributed to their problems'. That might rebound on the individual – and 'it makes me worry I haven't protected the service user in our care properly'. It can also have repercussions for the organisation.

Box 5: Media awareness training

Some third-sector organisations provide training and other support for people who are willing to talk to the media. That helps them to know what to expect and to make informed decisions about whether or not to participate. It also helps them to tell their stories and present themselves in the most effective way. The media might not like the idea of people being 'coached' – or being media 'savvy' – but it is worth noting that many of the public figures who appear in the media will have been trained in how to present themselves and how to use their voice and their body language. Coaching and media training can be regarded as a reasonable response to an imbalance of power and control.

The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, for example, provides poverty-awareness training to help people with experience of poverty to use the media effectively. The training comprises four sessions looking at different aspects of poverty, with the aim of deepening understanding and building up people's confidence to talk about it. A key element is media awareness – examining the consequences of participation and pitfalls to avoid.

The UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) has also done media training for people with experience of poverty. This involved group work on determining what people wanted to say and how they might present themselves to the media. There was discussion of how to dress, body language, the use of one's voice and the role of images. The training session culminated in participants being interviewed on film so they could explore that experience and learn from it.

The Respect? Campaign is led and has been developed by a team of young people supported by staff from the British Youth Council and YouthNet. Its goal is to improve the representation of young people in the media, government and society by encouraging them to speak up and society to listen. Campaign members have had media training to help them gain the confidence to speak up, do media interviews and express the campaign's message. They also use social networking sites and blogs, write letters to editors and raise questions with MPs. YouthNet has commissioned an evaluation of the work so far, which is under way at the time of writing (www.youthnet.org/mediaandcampaigns/campaigns/respect).

Evidently, media training can take various forms according to what the needs are for particular individuals and groups. It can be about awareness of how the media works, or coaching concerned with presentation skills, or more systematic training on, for example, interviewing strategies. It should not start from the premise that the media is the 'enemy' but, rather, from a positive position that working effectively with the media can produce beneficial results.

Some of the larger national organisations concerned directly with poverty or working with client groups liable to experience poverty have developed strategies for responding to these media requests. Some have panels or a list of people who can be called on to talk to journalists about their experiences. They will usually have had some basic media training; their story will have been checked and they will have learnt how best to tell it (see Box 5). Some organisations prepare written accounts from individuals that might be sufficient for, say, a short newspaper piece, or might be followed up by an interview. Some organisations are prepared to offer different case study individuals to different media outlets in order to try to ensure that the person and their story resonates with readers or viewers. As one organisation said:

For the Daily Mail *we might want to put forward*

the example of an elderly widow living in a big house in the Wirral she can't afford to heat … But it's hard to get people like that to come forward and be in the media – they don't want others to know they're poor.

Box 6: Responding to case study requests: issues for third-sector organisations

- Recognise that the media is not homogeneous – they are not all 'good' or all 'bad'.

- Know the media: read the papers, listen to radio, watch television – and not just favourite, familiar and sympathetic outlets.

- When considering a media request, check out the track record of the journalist. (A good source for finding out more about journalists and what they write about is the Media Trust's Journalisted website: www.journalisted.com).

- Check out the newspaper/radio station/television or film company – look at what they have done and their approach/stance.

- Find out what story they are trying to do and how they want to do it. For example, what's the angle? What do they want case studies for?

- Consider the type of opportunity. In the press, feature articles often present more possibilities than news pieces, because they can cover issues in more detail and at greater length, and include extensive accounts of people's views and experiences. Radio can present individuals' stories without the complication of images. Television can be very powerful and may reach very large audiences.

- Build ongoing, long-term relationships with the media. Know how journalists work and what they want, and brief them about how to approach the case studies.

- Be discerning. It might be better to get good coverage from time to time, rather than frequent coverage of low quality and little influence.

- Carefully consider what consent is likely to be needed and how informed it might be. This is especially important if children or vulnerable adults are to be involved.

- Always be ready to refuse requests; resist oppressive requests.

- Aim for an honest and respectful treatment of people and issues.

- The emphasis should be on getting a strong message across, not just on promoting the organisation.

- Think through all the implications for case study individuals and, as far as possible, support them through the whole process. Encouragement to participate is acceptable; persuasion is not.

The selection of case study individuals by third-sector organisations can be a tricky ethical problem and connects also with concerns about (mis)representation. Some organisations, wary of the media, might avoid offering people who smoke, drink or even wear jewellery because of the image that might convey. The press officer at one organisation said that:

With public attitudes hardening, we are putting up 'deserving, respectable cases'. It would be nice to be able to be a bit braver.

It is easy to see why organisations, anxious to get their message across, might be inclined to 'play it safe'. Public attitudes might well harden in a recession; many people will – consciously or unconsciously – see some as deserving sympathy while others might be thought to be largely responsible for their misfortune. One consequence is that the 'warts and all' realities of poverty might not be properly presented and the limited range of examples can undermine credibility. 'Playing it

safe' can also mean filtering out voices that should be heard and denying a platform for individuals who do not conform to the model of what is acceptable, unproblematic or what is thought to go down well with the public.

Some organisations will put forward people who, they think, will fit the requirements of particular journalists. But a press officer expressed doubt about the ability of organisations to choose 'correctly':

Press officers in organisations have a very static view of where the papers are. So third-sector organisations may actually offer the 'wrong people' [as case studies] – *thinking x is a 'Telegraph person' when they aren't.*

Sometimes it can be appropriate to offer someone who has experienced poverty but is no longer in that situation; this can present fewer difficulties for the individual and can show that there is hope and that poverty can be overcome. Whatever strategy the organisation might adopt in responding to case study requests, there is particular merit in showing that people with experience of poverty are not 'different' – poverty can happen to anyone.

However, the majority of third-sector organisations do not have press officers and local organisations, in particular, have little capacity to deal with the media. If they directly serve a client group, organisations might have easy access to potential case study individuals. For others, this might be much more difficult. Local organisations can usually develop good relationships with the local media, which will generally be anxious not to alienate local communities. There can be greater risks with national media.

Whatever the size and capacity of the organisation, some basic issues need to be considered, (see Box 6). The most important point is that, as broker or 'dating agency', a third-sector organisation has substantial responsibilities to support and safeguard the interests of case study individuals. There are many aspects to consider here, including the attitude of the individual. Some people are very keen to appear in the media, tell their story and promote change. Their aim may be altruistic – not wanting other people to have to go through what they have experienced. Others are reluctant, lack confidence and perhaps do not

think their story is of interest. Many simply do not want such exposure. A communications officer at a charity said:

> *People going bankrupt won't come forward and be filmed – shame is a big issue for them.*

It is very important to provide opportunities for people to have a voice – but there may be a need to urge caution with the enthusiastic, or encourage and enable the reluctant.

Third-sector organisations need to be clear about their purpose and retain integrity. The chief officer of a campaigning organisation said:

> *We want to empower people, not to treat them as guinea pigs.*

Moreover, it should not be a marketing exercise for the organisation, it should not be about just getting people to tell the story that the organisation wants told. Organisations should be very wary of, in effect, denying a voice to some by acting as a filter or being overprotective and blocking their access to the media.

In Box 7, we set out important issues that individuals ought to think about before working with the media, telling their story and giving their views. It is based on our interviews with the media, the third sector and case study participants. It is not an exhaustive list, but it does set out key points to consider. The third-sector organisation should offer support to the individual, in particular helping them to consider all the implications of working with the media. People generally find it helpful to talk over the issues. Moreover, the organisation's staff might well be able to draw on previous experience of the media and be alert to potential consequences that the individual might not have considered.

Individuals who have been interviewed by the media stress the importance of being clear about the message and the purpose. One experienced interviewee said:

> *If I have anything positive to say I'll go on* [the local radio station]. *I'll stick to what I want to say.*

Talking about how their community group responds to media requests, a local activist said that the decision whether to get involved was taken collectively, after considering what might be achieved:

> *We sometimes say* [to the journalist] *ring us back in a few minutes, or give us your name and we'll ring you back when we've decided.*

Some people are very aware of self-presentation and image if they are to appear on television:

> *I take pride in myself, like how I dress … No, I wouldn't appear smoking a ciggie – it's a stereotype, they'd only use it to have a dig at you.*

Box 7: Telling your story to the media – a checklist of things to think about

Deciding whether you would like to take part

- Think about the potential risks to yourself, such as revealing personal information – perhaps inadvertently – such as details of your financial circumstances and where you live.

- Think about possible impacts on others, especially children and other family members. Discuss with them the possible impacts and whether to take part.

- Consider what others might think. Family, neighbours, friends and others in the community might comment and judge – and might be supportive or critical.

- Consider the agenda or motives of the journalist or media outlet – and how your story might be used.

Negotiating the involvement

- Determine whether or not your identity will be revealed (or is likely to become apparent); bear in mind that it can be difficult to fully disguise someone's identity.

- Find out where and how the interview will take place – on the phone, at home, at a community venue, or in a studio. Will it be pre-recorded or live? If possible, negotiate your preferred option/format.

- Discuss and agree what the interview would cover – you can ask to have the questions beforehand.

- Agree what your editorial input might be – for example, you might be able to check quotes in a press article before it is published. But it is very unlikely you will be able to see and comment on a draft article or broadcast piece before it goes out. Journalists are under no obligation to let you see pre-publication material – but you can negotiate.

- Note that you will probably be asked to sign a release form if you have been interviewed for television or radio. That gives you an opportunity to decide whether you agree to have your interview used.

How to do it

- Try to be confident and assertive, and stay calm.

- Be concise and specific; focus on your key message.

- Establish your boundaries beforehand – and stick to them. Say if you are not happy with the questioning. Try not to get sidetracked.

- Try to be positive if possible and say what action is needed.

- If it is for television, think about image – what you will wear, body language and background. Similar considerations apply if a photo is to be reproduced in a newspaper or magazine.

- Avoid 'off the record' conversation – there is no guarantee that it will not be used.

Get support

- If a third-sector organisation brokered this, they should be asked for support. That might include talking about the implications and the process, media training, a practice interview and accompanying you at the interview.

- In particular, consider whether you would like to have someone with you before, during and after the interview. Debriefing might prove to be as valuable as briefing was beforehand.

Factors to bear in mind

- Doing this might not change anything for you or for others.

- The interview will be edited.

- It might not be used or very little might be used – so be prepared for disappointment.

The consequences of presenting oneself in the media can be problematic, unpredictable and sometimes surprising. An unemployed family who had talked about their lives on a television programme recalled some very negative local reactions. People thought they must have been well paid for taking part and their children received flak at school for 'being on the telly'. But they were glad to have had the opportunity to give their views:

> You have to stand up. This is me. This is my life.

And a positive outcome was that they had received encouraging letters from people across the country – quite a few of whom had become good friends.

Guidelines and relationships

There are standards and codes of conduct for journalists and media organisations (see Seymour, 2008, p. 81). The Press Complaints Commission's code of practice says 'the press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures'. The National Union

of Journalists' (NUJ's) code of conduct requires members to 'ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair'. Both codes say journalists have a responsibility to avoid producing material likely to result in discrimination and stigma.

Guidelines are important, but, in practical terms, it is above all a matter of *trust* – the establishment of trusting relationships between journalists, the third sector and individuals. That takes time and effort to build up – and can easily be undermined. It should be borne in mind that a bad relationship can cause serious problems. The CEO of a major third-sector organisation said:

> *It's always a disastrous strategy to treat a journalist badly – then they've no loyalty towards you and can stitch you up.*

Some third-sector organisations work hard at building relationships. A media officer at a large charity said:

> *I've got a list of what I call my friends* [in the media] *but the relationships are quite hard to manage … I have someone on every paper and station … I do send a press release to everyone but with a personal note on top.*

> *I have a chat on the phone first and you get a sense of whether they're friendly and open to your issues, are they ready to have a joke, etc. Long gone is the lunchtime thing – I used to work for a PR agency and that's how I did my contacts, but now I have no budget and anyway journalists have no time for that … I don't think I've felt let down … the more open and honest you are, the harder it is for them to write something negative.*

Some journalists are very aware of their responsibilities and are concerned not to betray trust. A journalist who frequently covers stories concerned with poverty said:

> *There are NUJ guidelines on responsible reporting but they are infrequently referred to – I don't know how many journalists have*

read them … Much more relevant are the individual deals you make with people. I'll arrange with people from a charity the basis on which I speak to people, e.g. you might agree to anonymity or partial anonymity, agree whether to disclose the location or not, or you might agree beforehand that … I'll strike out anything they say that they're not happy with. I wouldn't do that with an experienced media professional, e.g. chief of police, but I will for someone like this.

Conclusions

There are opportunities for people who have experienced poverty to have a voice through the traditional media of press, radio and television. But the consequences and the potential benefits of participating in the media and, in particular, working with journalists need to be carefully considered and relationships need to be developed.

Whatever third-sector organisations may think of the media, they are too influential to be ignored. The media can get across personal – and powerful – stories. And good, accurate and sympathetic coverage in the media can present positive images and help to change public attitudes and perceptions.

3 New media, new opportunities

The changing media 'landscape'

The media has changed enormously over the last few years. There has been a massive proliferation of media outlets, a continually expanding range of communication technologies and applications, and the development of inexpensive production and transmission methods.

The driving force behind these changes has been the development of the so-called 'new media'. That term is almost impossible to pin down and, necessarily, its definition constantly changes (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media). In essence, 'new media' covers technologies and activities predicated on the use of the digital computer – the key example being the internet. It encompasses websites and online communications of all kinds, and the transmission of digital images and telephony. Old media was based on analogue technology and static forms, whereas new media is much more active, flexible and versatile. However, distinctions are now blurred, since most 'traditional' media forms also now use 'new media' technologies – indeed, they are being transformed by the new media. Television and radio are now transmitted digitally (terrestrially, by cable, satellite and on the web) and television, radio and newspapers have developed their own websites and their audiences interact with them via email and mobile telephones, texting and video. There is increasing use of a 'multi-platform' approach, with complementary coverage on traditional and new media. A producer described how that works:

> *TV brings in big audiences; radio brings in local audiences throughout the day; online gives interactivity and connection to new audiences. It also means that individual journalists may operate across several media. For example, many newspaper journalists are nowadays expected to write their piece for the paper, make a video about it for the newspaper's website and perhaps also post a blog and respond to comments posted by the audience.*

Interactivity is developing in various ways and at a rapid rate; a media analyst said that 'new media challenges journalism to be a discursive activity rather than a lecturing activity'.

Key features of the contemporary media landscape include the following.

- Increasing *fragmentation* of media and audiences, with multiple sources of information and entertainment. Nevertheless, there are still popular television shows and televised events seen by mass audiences – *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The X Factor*, for example, and some red-top tabloids still have millions of readers. Fragmentation of technologies is expected to give way to an opposite trend of online integration, with the computer (and mobiles such as the iPhone) incorporating many functions.

- Allied to fragmentation, *media consumption habits* are changing – and changing fast. Many viewers now access television programmes at times that suit them – via the BBC's iPlayer, for example – while internet protocol TV services offer TV and films on demand. Analysts Dresdner Kleinwort forecast that, by 2012, about 20 per cent of UK viewing will be via the web or downloads, rather than on traditional TV channels (Spanier, 2008). Online video has grown very rapidly in popularity and is now accessed regularly by the majority of internet users. And some newspapers' websites are now more popular, reaching much bigger audiences than their parent hard-copy newspapers. In addition, the rapid proliferation of good mobile web access is changing not just how, but also where, people connect with digital media.

- Media *content* is changing too. In particular, mainstream television now provides less current affairs output – although there are rolling news outlets such as BBC News 24 and (nowadays available to many) CNN, Sky News, etc. Regional factual programming is in decline and is now additionally threatened by ITV's commercial difficulties.

- Traditional media organisations are facing serious *economic pressures*. Newspaper circulations are falling – threatening especially the local and regional press, but also some national papers as well. Free newspapers are displacing the paid-for press. Falling advertising revenues caused by fragmentation, the shift of advertising to the internet, declining audiences and the recession are adding to the pressures on newspapers, commercial radio and television. Economic pressures are also mounting on public service broadcasting (Foster and Meek, 2008).

- *Falling costs* of production and transmission in the new media mean much lower 'barriers to entry' into the market and result in ever-continuing growth of new outlets. Many people have the means to make their own video, or can write a blog, or develop their own website, and internet transmission is easy and inexpensive.

- There is enormous growth in *user-generated content*, primarily on internet sites, facilitated by new technology and stimulated by economic pressures on the media. 'Citizen journalism' or 'digital volunteerism' is producing huge amounts of content. 'YouTube's repository is growing by 18,720 hours per day, Flickr by four million photos per day, Wikipedia by 1,400 articles per day' (Currah, 2009, p. 148). This is 'blurring the lines between production and consumption, between making media and using media' (Deuze, 2007, p. 74).

- There is, however, a significant *digital divide*. Many people can easily access the internet and broadband now reaches the majority of households (57 per cent of UK homes had broadband in 2008). An even larger majority have mobile phones. Even so, some – the so-called 'digitally poor' – are left behind and left out, especially in terms of access to the internet. They include, notably, older people, those on low incomes and people who are less educated or perhaps have literacy difficulties, visual or hearing impairments. This has to be a key issue in developing opportunities for people with experience of poverty to have a voice via the new media and to participate in the media so that it can be more representative of the whole community.

Many aspects of the media landscape have been changing (Watson, 2008) and further changes will occur, some of which cannot even be guessed at today. Two overarching trends or movements should be emphasised.

- First, there is a new *connectedness* – a shift from forms characterised by communication from one source to many people towards forms characterised by 'many-to-many' interactive communication.

- Second, there are important shifts in control – away from heavily controlled media with powerful 'gatekeepers' towards forms that have little central control (internet social networking sites being a major example).

Such changes and movements present new opportunities, but create problems too. The noisy, uncontrolled chaos of the internet may seem open and democratic – but getting *Cathy Come Home* across to a captive mass audience with few competing options was, in many ways, much more straightforward (Platt, 1999).

New opportunities for self-expression

Using the new media, people with experience of poverty can produce their own stories and accounts, working alone or within groups, with or without organisations to support them. In a sense, that is nothing new – people have always been able to tell their stories to others. And, in the past, if they have been unable to gain access to the traditional mass media, they have been able

to produce their own campaigning newsletters, for example, or take and display photographs and perhaps even make films. What is new is that such activities can now be done in many different ways, often more easily and cheaply. Above all, there is the *possibility* – which may or may not be realised – of communicating with large numbers of people, at little or no cost.

If they have access to the internet and the requisite skills, individuals and groups can send emails, develop websites, write blogs and use Twitter, record and upload sound, stills and videos. Social networking sites, such as YouTube and MySpace, have been particularly important in generating a huge increase in the production of these materials and providing new opportunities for people to present themselves and their views (see Box 8). Some of those whose voices are largely absent from the traditional media have exploited these new opportunities very effectively.

Box 8: Key social media

- *Facebook.com*: the biggest social network, popular with older people and those from professional backgrounds.

- *MySpace.com*: promoted as 'cooler' than Facebook; focuses on fashion, music and film.

- *Bebo.com*: particularly attractive to teenagers, with a focus on bands, artists and writers.

- *Linkedin.com*: a network for professional people to build contacts and do deals – 30 million users worldwide.

- *YouTube.com*: the biggest and most watched of the video uploading websites, with millions of videos and including a comment facility. Set up in 2005 and now owned by Google.

It is argued that the act of production is itself liberating and empowering, and some community media projects take the view that the product, while important, is not the principal consideration.

The producer of a community radio station said:

It is not about getting a programme broadcast – it's what goes into the making of the programme.

A producer of community-based films said:

Making films helps people learn about a subject and explore their values and beliefs.

There is certainly merit in such arguments. Groups working together learn and develop together, and individuals may grow in knowledge and confidence. *There is a film accompanying this report (see www.jrf.org.uk), made by a group of people in rural Norfolk living on low incomes. It is clear that the process of making the film, telling their stories and giving their views was an uplifting, even liberating experience for those involved*. In relation to developing public understanding of poverty, however, the production of content is a means to an end – the material has to be effectively communicated if it is to stand a chance of being influential.

The individual, working alone, can be effective and reach substantial audiences – the 'Baghdad Blogger', Salam Pax, is a celebrated case in point (though the key was that he was 'discovered' and promoted by the mainstream traditional media). But the support of third-sector organisations can be invaluable and, indeed, necessary, especially in opening up and developing opportunities for people with experience of poverty (see Box 9). Their role can include:

- provision of access to technology, particularly the internet;

- helping people to overcome problems such as lack of literacy or language skills, or lack of confidence;

- helping to train people in the use of the technology – this might range from helping people to use email through to developing video-editing skills;

- provision of internet space for hosting/publishing material so that it can be accessed by others.

Box 9: Overcoming the 'digital divide'

The provision of access to the technology is a basic requirement and is still very important. Many people on low incomes do not have a computer and lack the skills or confidence to use the internet in public libraries.

Third-sector organisations can play a key role in providing access. In Liverpool, for example, local organisation Dingle Opportunities provides computers, with internet connection, for use by the community. Sixteen computers are located in the project's Innovations Factory (a converted pub), 30 are in local community organisations and there are six computers on a bus that tours the area (and has a 3G link to the internet). Help is available and people develop skills and confidence – and have access to a wide range of services, opportunities and jobs. The project has now developed a web portal, www.liv-it.net, which provides local information and has space for locally authored content.

As with the traditional media, individuals need to think through the consequences – intended and unintended – of presenting themselves, their stories and views. Anonymity may be easier to achieve, but the new media also gives worldwide and long-term access to material. This might present problems. For example, an asylum-seeker might give an account on a local organisation's website (or in a local newspaper with a website), which will enable people in their country of origin to access that material. In addition, posting an anonymous blog or comment is not risk-free; it is open to possibly savage responses, which may have a significant impact on those wanting to present their stories and views in the hope of obtaining a sympathetic hearing.

Getting an audience

The new media holds out the tantalising prospect of self-expression to large audiences, but actually capturing those audiences presents an enormous challenge, especially if the subject is not particularly attractive or popular.

It is easy enough to get material on the web, but who will actually find it and look at it? Even with powerful search engines, finding material on the internet can be difficult – and often seems to be a matter of luck and chance encounters. Many websites are dense and hard to navigate; it can be difficult to find things even when you know what you are looking for. The result, as a media analyst said, is that: 'The obscure blog is likely to stay obscure'.

And there are a staggering number of obscure blogs; at the last count, 184 million people worldwide had started a blog (Technorati.com, 2008). Even so, it is possible to use blogging effectively to give people a voice and to promote immediacy and interactivity (Wallace, 2008).

While it can be hard enough to get an audience for 'popular' material, it is far harder to get people to find and view a video or blog about the experience of poverty. A journalist commented that: 'People are looking for entertainment, not serious stuff'.

Nevertheless, it is possible to get 'serious stuff' across to big audiences – as has recently been demonstrated in the US presidential election. The candidates' campaign teams – which included 'cyber advisers' – used the social networking capabilities of the internet to circulate information, bring supporters together, raise funds, encourage registration and enthuse supporters to go and spread the word and get out the vote. It has been said that what internet supporters gave candidates was priceless – their email addresses (Wapshott, 2008; Moss and Phillips, 2009). The company behind Obama's online election campaign, Blue State Digital, is now working with the group Searchlight in the UK to develop a virtual community opposing the British National Party in the 2009 European elections. The approach is based on sending out emails eliciting support and a donation, asking recipients to forward that email to others (Taylor, 2009).

The new media is undoubtedly very useful for organisations seeking to attract supporters and undertake lobbying campaigns (Colborne, 2009). International relief and development charity Tearfund, for example, has set up a Facebook group whose members are asked to send targeted emails when the organisation is campaigning on a particular issue. Users are known as 'badgers' and acquire points for their activity, moving up a series of ranks to become 'SuperBadgers'. Over 19,000 people are registered and this approach is said to be very effective (http://youth.tearfund.org/campaigning/superbadger.htm). Other campaigning organisations have used email, social network sites and text messaging to alert supporters to call radio phone-ins, write letters or join online debates to keep a particular issue alive in the media.

Very large online communities can be developed to circulate material such as news reports, videos and blogs. Communities and networks can also serve to link together people creating content in different places, enabling them not only to share material but also to engage in collaborative work.

Campaigns can be nurtured by the careful and well thought out use of the internet and mobile telecommunications to link together otherwise dispersed communities. To disseminate material effectively, there are two basic requirements:

- produce good quality, interesting and engaging material;

- help people to find it and then want to pass it on.

These requirements are mutually supportive. The aim is to create content that is so good that people want to find it, look at it and pass it on to others (see Box 10).

Box 10: Who would bother to look at this?

This is a key question that those producing material have to ask themselves. If it is to be attractive to a large audience, quality counts and material has to be interesting to people who are used to moving on quickly. The material – a video, an audio podcast, a blog – should be short, concise, fresh, informative and well produced. In dealing with a difficult theme like poverty, it is good to convey hope and important to indicate what the viewer or listener might do about it– by donating, getting involved in campaigns or simply passing on the material to inform others.

An element of humour can help to get a serious message across and attract audiences. For example, humour is going to be used in legacy advertising for the first time in the UK as part of a new campaign by charity consortium Remember a Charity. Television commercials going out in spring 2009 will use 'humour to raise the subject of legacy-giving in a family setting'. The aim is to 'break down barriers', creating a talking point with an advert that is light-hearted but has a serious message (www.professionalfundraising.co.uk).

A great deal of material is of poor quality and of little interest. The obscure blog will indeed remain obscure and the jerky, unedited video filmed on a mobile phone will – almost certainly – be seen by very few. Quality matters: it is notable that the ten most popular videos on YouTube in 2008 were all made by professionals. Again, this points to the important role of third-sector organisations (and some public-sector institutions and organisations as well) in helping to generate better quality material. That might be done by helping people to determine what they want to say and how they want to say it, in order to create a blog that stands a chance of being read or a film that is at least watchable. Organisations might also be commissioners and help produce material, providing people with experience of poverty with the opportunity to tell their stories – operating in a similar way to 'traditional' media, but more enabling, less controlling.

Some third-sector organisations are strongly committed to helping people have a voice and they engage proactively with both the traditional and new media. Some of them see media communications as at the core of their work and are confident about exploring the power of new media. Others are much more focused on service delivery and may be nervous, or not very aware, of the new media.

Charities working in the field of international development often tend to be particularly 'media savvy' and are, for instance, increasingly exploiting the potential of personal accounts presented on video. Water Aid's multi-media officer, says that:

Putting [these] *videos online is quite new and has been hugely successful. Charities are also starting to see the importance of giving a voice to the people they work with, which we can do more of through film.*

(Beth Jepson, quoted in van Vark, 2008)

Another – and highly impressive – example is the Katine development project in Uganda supported by *The Guardian* and Barclays Bank. The project's website (www.guardian.co.uk/katine) hosts videos of villagers talking about their lives, activities, hopes and fears. A media officer (appointed by the Panos Institute) has facilitated this process and the website notes that:

An important part of the Katine project is listening to its residents – finding out about their lives and giving them a forum to express their views.

Box 11: Quality content – digital storytelling

A few years ago, the BBC supported a number of digital storytelling projects across the UK. The ones that ran in Wales – 'Capture Wales' – were the most developed and thought through in terms of both theory and practice. Individuals were helped to tell stories about themselves in their own words with their own photographs. A key aim was to reach people who are normally 'beyond the digital divide' using stills – because almost everyone has photographs that illustrate their lives and their memories (see www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/yourvideo).

The project helped people to develop their stories and used workshops to provide training. The telling of the story is central, the use of technology a secondary issue. Daniel Meadows of Cardiff University who ran the project says that he might spend three days with a participant facilitating them to tell their own story in four short, well-crafted paragraphs. These pieces, shown on television and made available on the web, demonstrate how compelling, high-quality material can be produced – with investment of time and effort (see www.digistories.co.uk and www.photobus.co.uk).

To view a video that particularly connects – in a moving, yet unsentimental way – with the issue of living on a low income, see the Family Holiday Association's piece at http://society.guardian.co.uk/flash/page/0,,2213612,00.html.

In a film accompanying this report, Daniel Meadows talks about his work and the concept of digital storytelling.

In Scotland, Oxfam, working in partnership with other agencies, has been using the media to help change people's attitudes towards asylum-seekers. Leaders of refugee communities have been trained in media presentation and interview techniques. In addition, young asylum-seekers were trained to interview and film their classmates in primary school. Their film, *Primary*, showed the welcoming attitudes of the children in their own voices. It was short – only 90 seconds long – and subtitled so that it could be shown in public spaces such as bus and train stations and shopping malls as well as in presentations and on YouTube (Asylum Positive Images project; www.oxfam.org.uk/uk).

Personal accounts and views presented on the websites of campaigning or service-oriented organisations may be commissioned by the organisation or submitted by individuals. Either way, it is important to ensure that these materials are easy to find. The extent of editorial control needs to be clarified as well, with rules against inappropriate material and the implementation of effective moderation of the site.

Individuals and groups have various options about where they place material. It might be on a social networking site, a free blog site, or the website of a third-sector or public-sector organisation. There are other options. In particular, the traditional media takes content from individuals, which might be in the form of comment, stills or videos. The value of such user-generated content has been particularly and

powerfully demonstrated by material submitted by witnesses to events such as terrorist attacks, filmed on mobile phones and posted on media sites. There is now scope to submit all kinds of material covering a wide range of issues and angles. Many newspapers are now very keen to have short videos from their readers to put on their websites, with contributors acting as so-called 'citizen journalists' (see Box 12). An advantage of posting on such sites might be that people visiting the website for other information might find this individually generated material. More generally, a large and well visited website can serve as a 'branded umbrella' providing routes that bring in the audience.

Box 12: Getting material onto media websites

Citizen journalism certainly has its detractors, including journalists who think it is second-rate, unaccountable and unprofessional (Keen, 2008). But there is a real opportunity here, both for individuals and for third-sector organisations submitting their own material. A print journalist said that he and his colleagues simply do not have the time to generate sufficient material for his newspaper's website:

[Editors are] *desperate to get more stuff on the website, but have cut staff to such an extent that they have no idea how to do it. They are desperate to embrace the digital future and turn us into an online brand. In theory it's doable, but we can't do all this and the newspaper as well while cutting staff.*

To reach the intended audience it is essential to be proactive. Take the example of a third-sector organisation that has gathered material presenting personal accounts from people with experience of poverty. In addition to publishing that material on its website, the organisation could:

- send an email and e-flyer to all the organisation's members and contacts telling them about the material, and providing a link to it;

- ensure media communications such as press notices include links to this material;

- engage with others' websites – for example, by posting material on social networking sites or discussing it on relevant websites.

In the process, a 'community of interest' might be built up; this might be very extensive and might be regularly provided with material or be engaged in dialogue. If the aim is to reach very large audiences – perhaps as large as those reached by the mass media – then this requires people to pass on the material to others. In other words, material presenting the voice of people with experience of poverty would 'virally' cascade via people's networks. A strong 'viral video' might have a substantial impact on public knowledge and understanding – and might be far more cost-effective than conventional charity advertising. Moreover, the internet provides opportunities for posting comment and engaging in discussion, adding a powerful interactive dimension within the continually evolving community of interest.

Box 13: Stories on the web from people experiencing poverty

Examples of case studies and stories from people experiencing poverty and exclusion in the UK have been brought together on the Church Action on Poverty website (www.church-poverty.org.uk/resources/voicebox). This material includes:

- written pieces – for example, 'credit crunch case studies' and testimonials gathered by the 'Get Fair' campaign;

- podcasts – audio interviews with destitute asylum-seekers;

- videos – including BBC interviews (*No One in Our House Works*, a film featuring a family coping with unemployment) and links to Oxfam's videos on YouTube that feature personal accounts of living on a low income.

Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme (www.oxfam. org.uk/resources/ukpoverty) has recently started a new blog, 'UK Poverty Post', where 'journalists, politicians, NGOs and, most importantly, ordinary people can share information and opinion on poverty in the UK'.

There are numerous online communities based around particular interests. One interesting example, which connects with social justice issues, is 'The Ship of Fools', a Christian 'webzine' and interactive community launched in 1998 (www.ship-of-fools. com). Current discussion topics include corporate tax avoidance and the very topical 'Is the recession making us selfish?' Another relevant example is the US-based website AlterNet, which describes itself as a 'news magazine and online community that creates original journalism and amplifies the best of hundreds of other independent media sources' (www.alternet.org). It has a particular focus on the environment, human rights and civil liberties, social justice and media issues. AlterNet aims to be a 'reliable filter' bringing together media stories, blogs and other content from small sources, or even individuals, and it puts this material in front of an audience that it would otherwise never reach. There is also space for feedback from site users, with some 30,000 commenters registered on the site.

Techniques now used in commercial marketing can be of relevance in disseminating information about economic and social affairs. As well as the scatter-gun approach of viral campaigning, businesses are increasingly using smarter, more targeted methods of dissemination. Technical developments are enabling the construction of profiles of new media users and so-called 'behavioural targeting'. For example, Amazon sends out emails telling people about books likely to interest them, which are based on information held about their previous purchases. This profiling extends also – more powerfully – to profiles based on an individual's Google searches. Companies have been using social network sites to market their products – with mixed results (Matthews, 2008), but with a good deal of skill (Evans, 2008).

Alongside these approaches to targeting, businesses are using 'search engine optimisation' techniques (Kiss, 2008) – essentially methods that focus on particular key words to try to ensure that

their material comes to the fore when someone uses a search engine such as Google or Yahoo.

These methods may seem well outside the scope of many third-sector organisations – they certainly do not have the big PR resources that businesses have. However, an increasing number of organisations are developing targeted digital strategies, including use of social networking sites (Blyth, 2009). They are evidently aware that getting their message across – which can certainly include the real-life experiences of people living in poverty – requires investment in this kind of dissemination to reach audiences and, more particularly, to reach the right audiences.

Opportunities and possibilities

During the course of this study, it has become apparent that the third sector could take the initiative and be much more innovative. It could proactively engage with the new media, potentially attracting large audiences and making a big impact. An option would be to develop a web portal shared – possibly as a joint venture – by third-sector organisations large and small, which would host the contributions of individuals and groups, perhaps as 'digital stories', debates and so on. Like AlterNet, it could bring together existing material, acting as a 'reliable filter'. It could also support people to present their material well and could become a reliable and trusted resource enabling the media, policy-makers and the public alike to gain a better insight into the lives and views of those experiencing poverty. It would be best to present a manageable amount of well-presented, accessible examples that were illustrative of key issues and themes. The material could be presented in context, so that individual stories would be seen as illustrative of a wider situation. To be trusted it would have to be more akin to investigative journalism, not just unvalidated citizen journalism or campaign propaganda. Such an initiative could harness the new media to set the agenda and build bridges across social and economic divides, with the aim of developing better public understanding – in turn generating pressure for change.

Another – local-scale – initiative could be setting up a demonstration project to explore the potential of the new media. We have in

mind a project focused on a specific community experiencing poverty. Media and communications experts would work closely and intensively with the community to produce and disseminate material about people's stories, everyday lives, issues and views. As far as possible, individuals would be supported to make their own content – but with an emphasis on quality and achieving an audience. This would have to be a truly collaborative project, wanted and welcomed by the community involved. Such an initiative could test out what the new media offered – and what its limitations were.

Conclusions

The new media landscape has generated many new opportunities for individuals and groups to present their stories and their views. People with experience of poverty potentially have access to new platforms and can secure a degree of empowerment and control.

But the new media is no panacea. The biggest problem is to reach an audience in a confusing, complex environment where huge quantities of material are offered and there is massive competition for attention. It is possible, however, to reach audiences if material is of high quality and is transmitted effectively.

4   Conclusions: developing opportunities

This report is about how people with experience of poverty can engage with the media to get seen and heard. We believe that there really is no substitute for personal testimony: people with experience of poverty have something distinctive to say about the causes and effects of poverty (Holman, 1998; UKCAP, 2008). They are experts.

Their voices should be heard more frequently – and more loudly. Millions of people in the UK live on very low incomes, and the more comfortable majority know little about their lives and opinions. Poverty is under-reported in the media; and, when it is reported, those actually experiencing poverty are often not given the space to explain what it really means. No wonder that public opinion is ill-informed, confused, and contradictory.

There are certainly opportunities for people with experience of poverty to be seen and heard in the media. Journalists want case studies, while the new media is opening up new ways of communicating, potentially to big audiences. However, much more needs to be done to exploit and develop these opportunities.

We have noted the challenges in presenting material about poverty. It is not enough to present poverty as an issue that ought to be tackled. Whether the coverage is in the traditional or the new media, it has to be lively, engaging, interesting and watchable or readable. It should explain causes and point to action and hope, including what the audience might do about it. It should challenge stereotypes and make common cause, pointing out that poverty can happen to anyone.

Above all, it needs to be brought to life by presenting the experiences and views of individuals speaking for themselves. This could serve to convey positive messages about people who are active and trying to cope – not just passive victims stuck in a 'dependency culture'. Real stories from real people could also counter the tendency to create images and perceptions of 'us' and 'them', and could challenge forms of 'povertyism' that

render 'them' second-class citizens (Lister, 2004).

We have particularly emphasised the role of the third sector in developing opportunities for people to get seen and heard in the media. In the traditional media, third-sector organisations are often asked to provide journalists with 'case studies'. It is clear that organisations need to think through in some detail how to respond to such requests, balancing risks and benefits. We have set out key considerations for third-sector organisations, including reference to their responsibilities. We have also listed the issues that individuals should consider when asked to tell their stories to the media.

While it is important to make use of these opportunities, third-sector organisations do need to handle these situations carefully and, above all, to protect the interests of individuals. They therefore need to develop good awareness and knowledge of the media, and establish ongoing relationships with journalists. It is too simplistic just to refuse to work with all the tabloid press, for example. Doing that could mean potentially positive and valuable opportunities were missed.

There is undoubtedly a case for training courses and other events to help increase and deepen media awareness in the third sector, especially within smaller organisations. That should move well beyond the traditional courses on how to write a press release and needs to involve people with recent experience of media practice. Equally, there is much to be said for courses and events to help journalists and others in the media to gain a better understanding of poverty and the third sector. What is certainly needed are opportunities to establish mutual understanding, even respect, and to build relationships founded on trust.

The third sector also has a very important role to play in exploiting opportunities in the new media. Of course, individuals may themselves access the internet, without needing support

or input from the third sector. Traditional media producers such as television and newspapers also have a key role, notably through their websites and interactive engagement with audiences. But the third sector can have a pivotal, enabling role, not least in offering access to technology and training in its use. That is particularly relevant in providing opportunities to people on low incomes who may not have access to a computer and the internet.

It is not just a matter of access, however. Third-sector organisations are well placed to help individuals and groups produce quality materials and could also host and promote those materials. We have suggested some of the methods that organisations might use to draw an audience to those materials and build 'communities of interest'.

We have suggested the development of a web portal that would serve as a reliable source of material presenting the views of people experiencing poverty. We see this as a way of harnessing the potential of new media to set the agenda and build bridges, promote understanding and, in turn, generate pressure for change. It is to be hoped that such a venture could be done as a collaboration, with input and commitment from a number of third-sector organisations.

We have also put forward the idea of a local, community-based demonstration project using the media to give a voice to a community experiencing poverty. This would involve close collaboration between local people and media and communications professionals, testing out what might be achieved through the focused use of traditional and new media resources.

People experiencing poverty in the UK are under-represented and misrepresented in the media. There are undoubtedly opportunities to challenge and change this so that they may be properly seen and heard.

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